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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000016

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SUBJECT: UDF PARTY FRAGMENTATION LEADS TO VIOLENCE,
INTIMIDATION

REF: A. 03 LILONGWE 728

1B. LILONGWE 15

¶11. (U) SUMMARY. The expanding rift (reftel A) between President Mutharika and former President Muluzi, now chairman of the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF), has recently been punctuated by sporadic violence, allegedly by the UDF-affiliated Young Democrats. Members of the UDF known to be allied with Mutharika have been harassed and had their party-owned vehicles stolen in confrontations with old-guard party loyalist thugs, and the recent arrests for treason (reftel B) have increased the UDF's rhetoric against the current government. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) On January 2, allegedly with the blessing of UDF leadership, a group of Young Democrats confiscated a party vehicle from a UDF official thought to be on the Mutharika side of the political division. A district governor was reportedly beaten up in the incident, which occurred at Muluzi's home. The Young Democrats unsuccessfully attempted to retrieve several other vehicles. The vehicle was later returned to the regional governor, and UDF party officials have publicly dismissed the incident as theft.

¶13. (U) On January 5, a deputy minister was harassed by the Young Democrats because his nephew is an independent political candidate in the upcoming bi-elections. The nephew's election would weaken the UDF's position in Parliament, thus strengthening the influence of Mutharika. Another UDF governor was attacked at a Mutharika rally in the area on the same day. The perpetrators, presumed to be Young Democrats, were later arrested.

¶14. (U) Late in 2003, a UDF cabinet minister was verbally harassed and threatened because of his alliance with Mutharika. The minister, previously held in high regard by the UDF, was not injured but has clearly alienated the UDF old-guard. In an effort to distance himself from the incident, Muluzi denounced such acts and offered a public apology.

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT. Though the UDF has no shortage of political foes, it has obviously turned on itself. The incidents above illustrate just how deep the division between party and government has gone. Fueled by the President's anti-corruption drive and determination not to provide financial and political support to the party, fundamental disagreements between the two sides have caused each to lash out at the other, though in markedly different ways. The UDF (also known as the Muluzi side), unable to discern where party influence in governing the country ends, has reverted to some of its old tactics of intimidation and thuggery, even if on a petty level. The government, or Mutharika side, has responded by reducing its political dependence on the UDF and acting independently. Mutharika's continued assertion that party and government are not necessarily one and the same has apparently left Muluzi frustrated, surrounded by an ever-dwindling circle of allies. In reaction, Muluzi is taking more extreme measures. Ironically, Muluzi's propensity for extra-legal actions may make it easier, both politically and legally, for Mutharika to neutralize Muluzi's persistent grip on power.

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